

22 April 1983

Secrecy proposals get a cool reception

Some members of Congress are taking a skeptical view of the administration's attempt to drastically tighten government secrecy.

The skepticism is understandable. According to news reports, administration officials are unable or unwilling to provide Congress with examples of the kind of "harmful leaks" they want to stop with their drastic new policies.

Last month, President Reagan issued an executive order imposing on all government employees who have access to classified information the kind of prior restraint traditionally imposed only on CIA agents and certain defense personnel. Any such employee who may someday want to write or speak about his work must first submit the book, article or speech to one or more government agencies for review. The agencies, of course, would have the power to order the deletion of any material they didn't want made public.

Justice Department lawyers say the Reagan order covers soliders, spies, diplomats, cabinet members and civil servants — everybody who may have had access to classified information during his career. And according to some interpretations, the order is binding on these people permanently, even after they leave government service.

Rep. Don Edwards, D-Calif., is concerned about the almost unrestricted censorship power the order gives to government agencies. Edwards says the administration hasn't tried to balance the need to keep sensitive material restricted with society's need to have access to government workings.

In addition, administration officials are talking about seeking felony penalties for people who leak classified

information and about subjecting those who receive or publish the information to civil penalties.

President Reagan has reportedly complained many times about leaks of both classified and unclassified information, and has asked that they be stopped. While the leaks are obviously annoying to Reagan, the White House hasn't provided Edwards' judiciary subcommittee with any examples of leaks that are harmful to national security. Subcommittee members would like to see some justification for Reagan's order.

No one is saying that the government doesn't have legitimate secrets that should be kept. But one witness told Edwards' committee that the government puts the secrecy stamp on all kinds of information that shouldn't be classified. That's a fact that has been brought out time and again over the years.

One writer who routinely receives leaks of classified information from all over Washington is Jack Anderson, whose column appears in the Standard. Very often, the leaked information Anderson publishes is exactly the kind of information citizens should be getting about their government and their elected and appointed officials. It seems to be classified for no particular reason, except to keep the public from learning how the government muddles along.

Congress should demand justification for the administration's secrecy plans. If justification isn't provided, Congress should demand an end to it.

The kind of secrecy Reagan wants would not only protect legitimate secrets, but would deprive the public of useful, needed information. Government needs less secrecy, not more.